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It is all too easy for the public to switch off from the threat of climate change. Politicians can engage people by embracing environmentalism as a political issue, and arguing that economic inequality and climate change are connected through the politics of sustainability.

In 1935, when the air was clogged in Washington DC by the topsoil that had been blown there from the dust-bowl, legislators immediately took drastic action. However dramatic the destructive effects of large scale agriculture in the interwar period in the Midwest USA, they were less serious than those we face as a result of global climate change. But for many people living in rich nations today, the effects are invisible. Not so for the inhabitants of Pacific islands that will soon be submerged by rising oceans, as the tears of the Filipino negotiator at a UN climate meeting in 2012 made clear. Still our leaders do not act.

Do we have to experience a phenomenon first hand to be able to engage with it? Public perceptions of the threat of terrorism suggest that we do not. The participants in mass protests around the world following the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* were overwhelmingly people who had not only been nowhere near Paris when the event occurred, but who had also never read, nor even perhaps heard of

the publication. The threat of Soviet nuclear attack during the cold war years also mobilised mass consensus. Some research suggests that voters are more likely to be worried about immigration if they live in rural areas which are almost entirely unaffected, than are those who live in parts of the city with large immigrant populations. These things suggest that it is neither necessarily the presence of a problem in people's everyday lives, nor its perceived scale, that determines whether people are worried about it.

Research on the origins of religion suggests that humans have a cognitive disposition to attributing agency to anthropomorphic entities; we imagine gods, in other words, as magnified projections of human capabilities. More than this, we see them as chimera: as agents with the capacity for thought and action that we recognise in a human face, but with the powers of other animals, or of phenomena such as wind, thunder or waves. In a similar way, the Soviet threat, terrorism, or migrants in the xenophobic imagination, represent personified fears – personified in the images of foreign leaders, dark-clad warriors, or ragged boat people.

The high priests of climate change – the scientists who form the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – tell us that the phenomenon of global warming is caused by a more diffuse agency, one that it seems impossible to put a face to. It is caused by a techno-industrial complex (energy production, agriculture, transport, deforestation) which represents and embodies an entire way of life that has put down deep roots since the industrial revolution. When someone tries to put a face to climate change – whether it be a politician such as Dick Cheney or the CEOs of polluting corporations such as Chevron – the 'face' quickly denies responsibility. They can easily do this if only by relativising their contribution, although pretending the phenomenon is of limited importance, or that it does not exist at all, is a more common response.

It is even worse when we try to acknowledge that it is we ourselves, as consumers, who are responsible for this vast problem. Not only is it hard to associate our own petty actions with a looming disaster of dimensions greater than mushroom clouds or collapsing office blocks. It comes naturally to fear an enemy, but fear of ourselves is unlikely to become a powerful motivator for action. This is all the more problematic when the only remotely coherent message comes from scientists themselves, who are not professional communicators. The combination of deep specialism and multidisciplinary perspectives that makes up the broad scientific consensus on climate change is open to manipulation and distortion from actors who have other interests at stake. For this reason, the airing of scientists' dirty laundry when emails were leaked from the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit in 2009 was whipped up into a public scandal that has gone down in history as 'climategate'. The exposure of the myth of the purity and certainty of scientific knowledge, through the spectacle of the social and sometimes political interactions through which knowledge is produced, led some eager commentators to conclude that where there is uncertainty, there is doubt, and where there is doubt, we should disbelieve.

It is all too easy for populists to ignore the fact that belief is only meaningful in the presence of some doubt, and that decisions must always be taken in the presence of a degree of uncertainty. So climate change is unquestionably a political issue, whether we are concerned with the imminence of the threat, or of the actions to take. So when our main political leaders in the UK signed a pledge earlier this year to take action on climate change, what were they doing? Were they de-politicising the issue in order to make it technical, to close the door to political objections to practical solutions? The emphasis on green growth and natural capital as pillars of the ecological transition would suggest

that this may be the case. Were they trying to slow the rise of the Green party, which is polling level with its counterpart engine of dissent on the right, UKIP, by forestalling election debates on the environment?

It is hard to imagine the three parties coming together in the same way on the question of inequality, which is a problem that people engage with perhaps more than climate change, or environmental problems more generally. Yet there may be advantages to trying to focus on how problems of inequality are connected to environmental problems. Consumption is unequal, and excessive consumption leads to waste and depletion, which is an environmental problem. It is poorer communities that are more vulnerable to the effects of pollution. The more ways we find for privatising nature, the less it will be accessible to those without the means. The privatisation of woodlands, for example, seems to be an environmental problem, but it won't necessarily lead to their destruction – it will more likely lead to ordinary people having to pay to access them. The aesthetic and health benefits of nature will become open only to those who are better off.

But there are similar limits to people's engagement with the problem of inequality and the problem of environmental degradation. Our horizons are limited. Our material conditions become degraded, but after a year or two we become habituated to our new surroundings – they become the new normal. Just as survivors of natural disasters can be no more likely than other people to be worried about climate change or the possibility of further disasters, the poorest in society are not campaigning for progressive taxation policies.

As NASA's photographs of the earth at night show, the world's geographical centres of capital accumulation are also the centres of energy usage, and it is to these places that the world's material resources tend to gravitate. This is all the more significant since unsustainable resources, such

as fossil fuels, overtook solar energy in the production of food: today only a tenth of the calories in our food comes from the sun. To a significant extent, the world's environmental problems are problems of distribution rather than problems of destruction or depletion.

Politicians find it difficult to make arguments about redistribution. They also find it difficult to contemplate the idea of 'degrowth' – reducing consumption but increasing wellbeing – preferring the 'win-win' formula of 'green growth'. But as the economist Thomas Piketty has shown, the benefits of growth mostly go to the owners of capital, who are a small minority in society. The historical exceptions to this have been the two world wars of the last century. These were great levellers for a variety of reasons which include the urgent mobilisation of political power for the good of whole nations, not merely for the wealthy.

The challenge for politics today is to mobilise the vast capital wealth that is controlled by a minority of citizens for the common good. If we cannot vote for this kind of change, then we are our own worst enemies. But voters need to be inspired by good leaders. What a significant part of the electorate may be looking for is the vision and courage that would be demonstrated by embracing environmentalism as a political issue, and arguing that economic inequality and climate change are connected through the politics of sustainability.